



Fantasy and Censorship: Dino Buzzati's correspondence from Italian colonies

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The aim of my contribution is to study the role and influence of Fascist censorship in the journalistic articles written by Dino Buzzati in *L'Africa di Buzzati* (Buzzati 1997). This volume is a collection of seventy-four articles that Buzzati wrote during his work as a special correspondent for the *Corriere della Sera* from two Italian colonies, Libya and Ethiopia. He was in the former during 1933 and in the latter between 1939 and 1940. The collection, edited by Marie-Hélène Caspar, includes sixty articles which were published in the newspaper and fourteen which were strictly blocked by the Fascist censorship. Caspar's volume is enriched by an extensive apparatus of notes and illustrations which document Italian colonization from Buzzati's particular viewpoint.

By placing Buzzati's work in a precise historical framework and discussing the problem of his 'orientalism', my intention is to demonstrate that Buzzati's work from Africa can be read as a document of Italian colonialism and that it confirmed, in terms of stereotypes and prejudices, not only the attitude of 'the West' towards North African peoples, but also his bias against cultural and social realities which were distant from the ones he was familiar with.

Buzzati and Censorship

It is fundamental to read the articles collected in *L'Africa di Buzzati* as documents of a peculiar historical period and to see how Fascist totalitarianism enters Buzzati's writing. As a witness and a reporter,



Buzzati needed to come to terms with censorship and censorship was a challenge not only for Buzzati but for every journalist who worked during the *ventennio*. However, it would be a mistake to think that Buzzati passively accepted the impositions that came from the Minister of Popular Culture: the correspondence he kept up with friends, colleagues and above all Aldo Borelli, his editor at the *Corriere della Sera*, shows his complaints and requests for explanations about the censor's cuts as two of its main topics¹.

Nevertheless, Buzzati worked within the framework and constraints of Fascist ideology and propaganda and the most important effect of the pressures exercised by censorship on him is the distortion of the image of his ideological position in relation to the political power that the reader gains from his articles. The contradictory feelings that

¹ Here are some examples from the correspondence with Borelli: 18 September 1940: «Mi è stata comunicata la circolare ministeriale contro i pezzi di colore. Ma neanche a farlo apposta, proprio in questi giorni brulicano, su tutti i principali quotidiani [...] articoli di varietà [...] proprio del genere che sembrava vietato. In che senso quindi va interpretata la parola "colore"?» [The *articolo di colore* is a particular type of article: more than providing news, it describes environments, feelings and moods]; 22 February 1941: «[...] dal 19 febbraio ad oggi ho già fatto sei articoli, di cui purtroppo due [...] sono stati fermati dalla censura [...]»; 11 February 1942: «[...] desidero farvi presente come ben tre [...] servizi siano stati bocciati dalla censura [...] per motivi che sinceramente non mi hanno persuaso pienamente. In realtà i criteri adottati negli ultimi tempi da questi censori [...] fa sì che buona parte del mio lavoro vada sprecata». Tr. 18 September 1940: I was notified of the ministerial circular against *pezzi di colore*. But in these days newspapers are crawling with articles like those that seemed to be forbidden. How is the word "colore", then, supposed to be interpreted?; 22 February 1941: From February 19th I wrote more than six articles, two of which have been unfortunately blocked by censorship; 11 February 1942: I want to tell you that as many as three of my articles have been rejected by censorship for reasons that did not fully persuaded me. The truth is that the criteria recently used by these censors waste much of my work. [Unless otherwise indicated all translations are mine]

emerge from his texts alternate enthusiasm and disillusion, participation and critique. Consequently, as argued by Cremonesi, «è d'immensa importanza confrontare i suoi pezzi con gli appunti nel privato dei diari personali. Soltanto questi documenti, infatti, restituiscono [...] disagi dell'inviato, stretto tra le maglie della censura, il suo codice di valori e l'evidenza della cronaca» (Cremonesi 2008: 335)². However, despite the support offered by the diaries, doubts and contradictions remain: on the one hand scholars such as Panafieu reject the idea of Buzzati as an author who was compromised by the regime (Panafieu 1989), on the other, Anna Tarantino thinks that «alcuni articoli hanno un carattere encomiastico e celebrativo fin troppo evidente» (Tarantino 1994)³.

There is an episode in particular which probably demonstrates better than anything else how difficult it was for Buzzati to actually rebel against the established order: after having worked for the *Corriere* under the Salò Republic, on 25 April 1945, Buzzati wrote the article "Cronaca di ore memorabili" to celebrate the liberation of the country from the Nazi occupation forces. The text patently adopts the argument of the Italian National Liberation Committee⁴ according to which the defeat of the Fascist regime was due mainly to the work of the Italian Resistance and not the Allies Armies (Cremonesi 2008: 368). In short, Buzzati moved, apparently without any problem, from obeying

² Tr: It is of crucial importance to compare his articles with his diaries. Only these documents tell us about Buzzati's uneasiness and the fact he felt stuck between censorship, his code of values and the evidence of news.

³ Tr: Some of the articles have an eulogistic and celebrative character which is even too clear.

⁴ The National Liberation Committee (*Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale*) was a political organization that held together the Italian Partisans in the last year of the War conflict, while the Nazi were occupying Italy after the armistice of 8 September 1943. After the liberation from the Germans, the Allies gave the Committee administrative control of Northern Italy. The Committee also formed the Italian governments from 1944 until 1946, when Italy became a Republic.

the orders of a Fascist editorship to following the instructions of the new forces in power.

However, as stated by Fabio Atzori, a too severe judgement of what emerges from Buzzati's journalism in terms of propaganda «appare ingeneroso se le [corrispondenze di Buzzati] si confronta[no] con quanto il *Corriere* – e gli altri giornali – andavano allora pubblicando» (Atzori 1997: 160)⁵. As recently as 2009, Atzori's position has been confirmed also by Bergamini's research on war journalism:

In questo quadro [publications during Fascism] spiccano anche esempi di giornalismo di qualche valore, collocati spesso in un'area grigia tra 'fronda' interna al regime e autentica professionalità, che riescono a descrivere con efficacia alcuni momenti e aspetti della guerra, anche se non arrivano mai [...] a rivelare davvero problemi, sconfitte, verità scomode. Esemplare in questo senso è la corrispondenza di Dino Buzzati [...]. (Bergamini 2009: 100)⁶

As I will show in the following pages, the contradictory signals which can be gathered from Buzzati's declarations and his narrative do not permit to fix an exclusive, coherent position for the author with respect to the politics of Fascism and censorship.

Aesthetics and Politics

Buzzati's experience in Africa may be considered to be representative of the Italian colonial experience: from the initial great expectations to the final disappointment and disillusion. When Dino Buzzati

⁵ Tr: [...] appears to be unfair if Buzzati's correspondence is compared with what the *Corriere* and the other newspapers were publishing at the time.

⁶ Tr: Within this framework, some examples of valid pieces of journalism stand out. They are usually placed within a sort of 'grey area' between internal opposition to the regime and authentic professionalism. They succeed in describing with effectiveness some moments and aspects of the war, even if they never reveal problems, defeats, and uncomfortable truth. Dino Buzzati's correspondence is, in these sense, exemplary.

left for Ethiopia in 1939 he was only thirty-two, but he had been working for *Corriere della Sera* for eleven years, he had already published two novels⁷, his first *elzeviro*⁸, and he had worked as a special correspondent from Libya and Palestine (Viganò 2006: 139). Buzzati saw in his expedition in Ethiopia the chance to make a sharp change in his career and life and to work 'within' the military world that had always attracted him⁹. However, in 1939, his idea of being finally at the centre of the historical stage, and of having the opportunity to write something of historical relevance, quickly faded¹⁰: the journalist had been sent to visit the colonial empire not when it was at its apogee, but during its sunset¹¹.

⁷ Dino Buzzati, *Barnabo delle montagne*, Milano – Roma, Treves-Treccani-Tumminelli, 1933a and Dino Buzzati, *Il segreto del bosco vecchio*, Milan and Rome, Treves-Treccani-Tumminelli, 1935.

⁸ Dino Buzzati, "Vita e amori del cavalier rospo. Il Falstaff della fauna", in *Corriere della Sera*, 27 March 1933b.

⁹ «[...] la vita militare corrispondeva alla mia natura. Mi era bastato il normale servizio di allievo ufficiale e sottotenente [...] per sentirmi attratto profondamente, e per assimilare, credo, fino in fondo, lo spirito di quel mondo che oggi sembra così screditato» (in Viganò 2006: 156, from an interview released to Alberico Sala and published in Dino Buzzati, *Il deserto dei Tartari*, Milano, Mondadori, 1966). Tr: Military life corresponded to my nature. The normal service as a cadet and lieutenant had been enough to feel deeply attracted, and to assimilate, I believe, completely, the spirit of that world that today seems so discredited.

¹⁰ Already by 13 April 1939, Buzzati had to deal with doubts and fears: «[...] vorrei tornare indietro, ricominciare la vita di redazione. Parto per un'impresa a me ingrata, in mezzo a gente estranea, solo come mai ho provato» (Buzzati 1997: 37). Tr: I would like to go back, to start again the life in the newsroom. I am leaving for an unpleasant enterprise, amid strangers, lonely as I have never been.

¹¹ From Buzzati's diary, 15 April 1939: «Tardi, di molto tardi dunque io comincio la vita, parto con un grande distacco, dieci quindici anni di ritardo sugli altri» (Buzzati 1997: 37 Tr: Therefore I begin my life late, very late, with a big gap, ten to fifteen years behind the others); Viganò states: «Come Giovanni Drogo [...] anche Buzzati attendeva la grande occasione, quella che

The obsession with the opportunity of doing something remarkable was an issue, during those years, not only for Dino Buzzati, but for an entire country. As stated by Fabrizio De Donno and Neelam Srivastava, «Italian colonialism [...] began with the hope that the new nation would play an active role in international relations [...]. Above all, it was hoped that colonial Italy would restore Italy's traditional centrality in Europe and [...] fascism exacerbated these preoccupations and ambitions» (De Donno – Srivastava 2006: 376). The chance to avenge the defeat of Adua of 1896, the longing for a new “promised land” in which to find a solution to the problems of unemployment and emigration, and the massive propagandistic effort of the regime, made Libya and Ethiopia more than two military and political objectives¹². As explained by Angelo Del Boca and Marco Mozzati, with the invasion of Ethiopia Mussolini achieved (with the support of many intellectuals) the climax of Fascist consensus in Italy (see Del Boca 1996: 320-350; Mozzati 1991). In 1936, Italy had its best opportunity of becoming a respected and feared empire, and the time of mediocrity seemed to be finally over. However, only four years later, Mussolini's decision to enter the war quickened the empire's decline and none of the country's problems had been solved (see Del Boca 2010: 247-250). Buzzati, by merging the techniques of objective journalism and his typically imaginative way of looking at the real, covered all the aspects of the colonial reality: from the descriptions of the great public works to geography, flora and fauna, but also sociology, climatic conditions and local cul-

avrebbe potuto riscattarlo da una vita monotona e mediocre. Ma ora che questa occasione è arrivata [...] Buzzati non è più così sicuro di volerlo; non si sente pronto, non crede nelle proprie capacità [...]» (Viganò 2006: 166) Tr: Like Giovanni Drogo, also Buzzati awaited for his great occasion, the one that might redeem him from a monotonous and mediocre life. But now that this opportunity has come, Buzzati is not so sure he wants it; he does not feel ready, he does not believe in his own abilities.

¹² See also the chapter “La terra promessa”, in Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale. Vol. 3: La caduta dell'impero*, Milano, Mondadori, 1996 [1976]: 193-217.

ture. Of most relevance here is that Buzzati's writing at this time is shot through with the encounter between European bourgeois sensibilities and the "Otherness" of Africa. The obvious disjuncture between the two loaded his work with ideological and political resonances.

Buzzati's representation of the work done in Ethiopia by Italian workmen and engineers tended as much as possible to give a sense of animation to the most technical operations, such as disembarkation of ships, construction of roads, buildings and bridges, and rural development of conquered regions. The building of the road through Dancalia is described as workmen and constructors' fight against hell (see Buzzati 1997: 123-129). Both the road and the desert are presented as animated figures, the former going straight to the heart of the desert (*ibid.*: 124) and being compared to a border line of mystery, a small enigmatic scratch on the surface of Dancalia (*ibid.*: 69)¹³. The features of mystery and the comparison with hell enrich the narrative of an eerie element and make it similar to that of the short story. Another clear instance is the comparison Buzzati made on 12 February 1940 between the development of the city of Gondar and the growth of a bean plant, in order to underline a fast-paced urbanization:

La Gondar che il ministro Teruzzi ha visto nei giorni scorsi ci ha fatto venire in mente [...] un vecchio corto metraggio scientifico sulla pianta del fagiolo. Si vedeva sullo schermo, in sezione, un fagiolo piantato entro la terra; dopo qualche istante gli nasceva una specie di codino che si sviluppava in radice; poi un'altra pro-

¹³ Caspar confirms the literariness and fantasy of the articles on the road through Dancalia: «Perché Buzzati ha descritto in questo modo la Dancalia? Certamente per mettere in rilievo il fatto che costruire una strada di quasi 500 km attraverso un deserto ostilissimo [...] era stato un lavoro titanico [...]. Ma Buzzati [...] non poteva non dare un altro significato a questa "strada della vittoria", un significato poetico». Tr: Why did Buzzati describe Dancalia in this way? Certainly to emphasize the fact that building a road of almost 500 km through a very hostile desert was an operation of titanic proportion. But Buzzati could not avoid giving another, poetic, meaning to this "road of victory".

paggine si spingeva in alto a cercare il sole, spuntava fuori dal terreno, diventava pianta, fioriva, fruttificava, tutto nello spazio di due o tre minuti [...]. Chi vive a Gondar [...] gode di uno spettacolo simile [...]. (*Ibid.*: 165)¹⁴

The reader loses himself within the rarefied atmosphere created by Buzzati, often without realizing the political implications of what he wrote: this is precisely what happens in “Gibuti in letargo” (Buzzati 1997: 112-116). As explained by Del Boca, Mussolini accused the French government of restricting Italian trade in Gibuti by a punitive tax system and by making disembarkation difficult by keeping the harbour and the railway in bad condition (Del Boca 1996: 300). Buzzati subtly described this situation by summoning a hostile spell, which transformed the city in a sinister maze of open hovels (Buzzati 1997: 113). The landscape contributes to articulate the “uncanny” scenario in which the story is set: the sun goes for his regular walk, the shadows shyly start to gain upon (*ibid.*: 113). At the end of the article Buzzati talks about a barrier of cold between Italian and French and casts a provocation: «eppure le cose dovranno cambiare, questo è nell'animo di tutti» (*ibid.*: 115)¹⁵.

From these first examples, it is evident how the use of animation, mystery and spells are summoned to confer an added interest to the description of the Italian colonial enterprise. However, Buzzati's journalism is closely bound by censorship and political influences. Between 1933, the year of Buzzati's first correspondence from Libya, and 1940, when he came back from Ethiopia, Buzzati had to write under the con-

¹⁴ Tr: The Gondar that the minister Teruzzi has seen during the last days reminded us of an old scientific short film on the bean plant. You could see on the screen, in section, a bean planted within the earth; after a while it grew a sort of little tail that developed in a root; then another layer pushed upward to seek the sun, sticking out of the ground, becoming a plant. It flourished, fructified, all in the space of two or three minutes. Those who live in Gondar can enjoy a similar show.

¹⁵ Tr: Yet things must change, this is in everybody's heart.

stant control of Fascist censorship. If it is true that Mussolini strengthened the control over publications from 1940, then it is important to remember that also before that date the regime imposed precise limits to the reporters' work. The relationship with censorship is one of the most problematic aspects of Buzzati's journalistic production between the 1930s and 1940s. *L'Africa di Buzzati* cannot be read without taking into consideration that everything Buzzati published in those years needed to be approved by the regime. Among others who worked on this topic, Maurizio Cesari was one of the first to demonstrate that from 1940 on, the alliance between Italy and Hitler's Nazi Germany and the first signs of a decrease in the popularity of Fascism amongst the population made Mussolini decide to increase the control over what could be published in the country (see Cesari 1978: 79-99). Alessandro Pavolini, Minister of Popular Culture, started to meet the directors of the main Italian newspapers every week, and from February 1940 the 'Commissione per la Bonifica Libraria' withdrew from the market all the books which were considered dangerous. Correspondence from the front was checked with particular attention, and several of Buzzati's articles were censored¹⁶.

In this particular cultural and historical context Buzzati's loans from fiction take the form of sporadic insertions of images and references to a potential 'otherness' which lives behind the world the journalist is describing and gives the impression that there is more than meets the eye. Buzzati's operation of merging facts and fiction is there but is also limited by the impositions established by the regime¹⁷. The

¹⁶ On the relationship between journalism and Fascist censorship see for example Bonsaver 2007: 8; and, more recently, Allotti 2012.

¹⁷ As explained by Oliviero Bergamini, «in Italia [...] il Ministero della Cultura Popolare [...] esercitava varie forme di controllo e condizionamento, la cui più emblematica era costituita dalle "veline", messaggi dattiloscritti inviati regolarmente ai giornali con precise disposizioni sulle notizie da dare e non dare» (see Bergamini 2009: 97. Tr: The Minister of Popular Culture in Italy imposed various forms of control and conditioning. The most emblematic ones were the "veline": they were typewritten messages regularly sent to

result is that Buzzati's use of fantasy emerges from the didactic and moralistic side of his journalism and from the descriptions of the landscape. Digressions are often dedicated to the reflections upon the stoic effort of the common men committed to the building of the colonial empire. By approaching this theme Buzzati can release his imagination. The same may be said when the protagonist of the piece of news is the landscape, to which Buzzati is able to confer a metaphorical meaning through the particular role that the desert plays within it.

The articles written from the colonies exasperate the aim of offering Italian citizens not only a useful knowledge of the life in North Africa, but also a moral lesson on the commitment of those involved in the colonial enterprise. The drive behind Fascist public works in Africa, consistent with longer European presences on the continent, was "civilization" and the fashioning of distant places in the image of the "Mother Country" (Buzzati 1997: 51). As stated by Caspar, the idea of the "civilizing mission" was one of the themes that the censors asked journalists to cover, and Buzzati was of no exception. Buzzati dedicated two articles in particular to the idea that African people were primitives who needed to be educated, while preferring in the rest of his texts to concentrate his attention on issues of social order, justice and the construction of streets and cities (*ibid.*: 57). The fact that Buzzati wrote explicitly about the "civilizing mission" only in two articles lets us think that his work might be distinguished from that of other writers of his time who were eager to praise the Fascist enterprise in North Africa. His references to the supposed superiority of the colonizers and to the legitimacy of Fascist operations are much subtler than those made by his colleagues and his judgments are often contradictory. On

newspapers with precise instructions on the pieces of information they were allowed to release). One of these *veline* is in the file "Dino Buzzati" in the Historical Archive of the *Corriere della Sera*. The document, dated 13 December 1940, states: «I corrispondenti [...] dovranno attenersi a uno stile sobrio e preciso, senza amplificazioni retoriche e sviamenti coloristici». Tr: Correspondents must comply with a sober and precise style, without rhetorical amplifications and coloristic diversions.

the one hand, it is then true that a distinction needs to be made: the correspondence of the vast majority of Italian journalists in those years was completely bent to the regime's will and this was true in particular at the *Corriere della Sera*, under Aldo Borelli's editorship. It would be unfair to make of Buzzati one among the group of journalists who transformed the *Corriere* into an enthusiast spokesman of the regime. On the other hand however, the content of these two articles and the way Buzzati addresses the natives in these texts has undeniable points of contact with Fascist racism.

In the first of these two articles, "Presidi italiani della civiltà" (15 November 1933), the protagonist, Major Rolle, has the paternalistic duty to guard oases, inspect garrisons, resolve quarrels and educate babies (Buzzati 1997: 88), more as a father than as a soldier. He is portrayed as the sentry of a magical realm which needs to be preserved: «Pare che l'aria del deserto spazzi via dagli uomini le ombre mediocri [...] rimane sospesa nell'aria una vaga sensazione di inquietudine e d'avventura» (*ibid.*:87, 88)¹⁸. Buzzati imagines the melancholy visiting Rolle, leaving him still, "on the threshold of his solitary reign" (*ibid.*: 89), and his being suddenly taken by an imagination which is typical of young people (*ibid.*). However, despite the use of fantasy, a certain level of condescension towards the customs of the indigenous people is undeniable: «Le vertenze tra indigeni sono più noiose che le tavole dei logaritmi» (*ibid.*: 87)¹⁹. Both of the two articles in which Buzzati addressed the theme of the colonizers' superiority – the second is "Notti di sabba nel Galla e Sidama" (23 August 1939) – present an explicit mockery of the colonized culture. The point in which this mockery is more evident is where Buzzati states that for African people it seems to be «istintivo il bisogno di trovare un oggetto, un simbolo materiale [...] che possa fare da intermediario, raccogliere le preghiere e trasmetterle

¹⁸ Tr: It seems that the air of the desert sweeps away the mediocre shades from men. A vague feeling of restlessness and adventure remains suspended in the air.

¹⁹ Tr: Controversies among natives are more boring than logarithm tables.

alla divinità superiore, troppo lontana e impersonale per poter essere concepita da quelle selvatiche menti» (*ibid.*: 259)²⁰. The customs and beliefs of the natives are alternatively defined as odd, peculiar, barbaric. With these premises Buzzati's journalism might be read from a political and ideological point of view: the aim of communicating a lesson in the professional ethics of those working on the major public works developed in the colonies is influenced by a paternalistic view of the natives. The manifestation of empathy for the engineers and workmen who had to bear the sun of the desert is biased by the expectation that in Buzzati's empathy lies an exaltation of the colonial enterprise which would be coherent with Fascist propaganda.

And it is the desert, where he described this enterprise, which offered Buzzati the real topic around which building a narrative that could move from cold reportage to existential speculations by making a good use of literary themes and metaphors. The conflict between nature and technology is one of the most recurrent themes within Buzzati's oeuvre, and it mirrors the one between fantasy and reality: it is a conflict in which the roles of good and evil restlessly exchange. In North Africa "nature" meant "desert" for Buzzati, while the progress and the supposed "civilization" brought by the empire were represented not only by the major public works developed on the colonized soil but also by the Italian Army with its weapons and its military superiority. While talking with Panafieu, Buzzati explained: «[...] Per me i paesaggi del deserto sono la cosa più bella del mondo [...] almeno come potenza spirituale [...] Uno ha la sensazione che debba succedere qualche cosa, da un momento all'altro» (in Panafieu 1973: 48)²¹.

Spiritual power and, above all, the expectation that something remarkable is going to happen: the great variety of Ethiopian land-

²⁰ Tr: instinctive the need to find an object, a material symbol that can be used as an intermediary, collect the prayers and transmit them to a superior divinity, too distant and impersonal to be conceived by those wild minds.

²¹ Tr: From my point of view, the desert landscapes are the most beautiful thing in the world, at least as a spiritual power. One has the feeling that anything can happen at any time.

scape offered Buzzati the chance to merge journalistic descriptions with a fantasy inspired by the power of a nature he thought he was seeing at its most primordial and powerful peak. The idea of the inaccessibility, mystery and eternity of the desert is a source of happiness and inspiration:

Si cavalcava alle falde di una specie di vulcano, in un paesaggio meraviglioso, meraviglioso nel senso africano, cioè di mistero e di solitudine [...] come se l'uomo avesse meno importanza nel mondo, di fronte a questa grandezza della natura, anzi, più che grandezza, solitudine e antichità... (in Panafieu 1973: 51)²²

This description of the desert is also coherent with the author's poetics of space as extensively analyzed both by Patrizia Dalla Rosa and Felix Siddell. Dalla Rosa studied the representation of geographical "otherness" in Buzzati as a symbol of the mystery the author saw hidden behind everyday reality (see Dalla Rosa 2002, 2004), while Siddell focused on the nature of space as either a subjective construction of the viewer's mind or an objective map of reality (see Siddell 2006). The mysterious duplicity of the natural space within Buzzati's oeuvre, in particular as opposed to technology and progress, is confirmed by his correspondence from Italian colonies: the desert is not only a source of fascination, but also a hostile environment, ferocious and merciless, which obliges men to fight against loneliness and the oppressive presence of a torrid sun. On Buzzati's first trip to Libya in 1933, the air of the desert is described as burning, while the mountains which are constantly devoured by the relentless sun appear framed in a tremendously ancient landscape²³. In his article "Colori di guerra shariana" Buzzati mentions arid cliffs and gives to an entire paragraph the emblematic ti-

²² Tr: We were riding along the lower slope of a volcano, within a marvelous landscape, marvelous in the African sense, which is of mystery and loneliness, as if men had less importance in the world when compared to this natural greatness, or rather, more than greatness, loneliness and antiquity.

²³ See "Deserti tra Damasco e Baalbek", 31 August 1933 (Buzzati 1997: 73-76).

tle of "Sete" (Buzzati 1997: 77-81). An exhaustive series of examples of the ambivalent representations of the African space is offered by Caspar in the section "La poetica buzzatiana dello spazio" of her introduction to *L'Africa di Buzzati* (*ibid.*: 61-72). What is more relevant to me here is to highlight the fact that this ambivalence is an important proof of the literary richness of this part of Buzzati's journalistic work: nature is depicted coherently with the characteristics it has in his fantastic short stories, and the journalistic context does not imply a renunciation to practice the association between nature and fantasy as opposed to technology and progress, which gives his work metaphorical and philosophical depth²⁴.

Desert and Heroes: History in *L'Africa di Buzzati*

The metaphorical role assigned to the desert is also important because it represents the framework of a narrative which aimed to explore and account for the experience of the new imperial reality. The ambiguous characterization of the desert cannot be ascribed only to Buzzati's dislike of technology and progress and his love for the power of uncontaminated nature. In Charles Burdett's words, «the consciousness of the author is inseparable from the system that it exposes» (Burdett 2011: 347): hence, the "system of elements", as it was defined by Michel Foucault (1970: xx), which informs Buzzati's representation of

²⁴ See for example the role of the desert in the short story "Il Re a Hormel-Hagar" (in Buzzati 1958). For the conflict between nature and technology in Buzzati's fiction see at least Lazzarin 2008a, 2008b. Two clear examples on this topic from his fiction: in the short story "La macchina che fermava il tempo" (in Buzzati, Dino, *Il crollo della Baliverna*, Milan, Mondadori, 1954: 116-123) a system failure of a machine which can lengthen men's existence reverses the process and consumes hundreds of lives in a handful of seconds (Buzzati 1954: 1116-123); in the novel *Il grande ritratto* the entire action is set in a world where the excesses of scientific progress already possess such a fictional level of horror that Endriade, the protagonist, can build a machine shaped on the memory of his dead wife (Buzzati 1960a).

the colonized environment is built on a perception of reality imposed from above. Buzzati cannot separate himself from the reality he observes and of which he, as a correspondent of an Italian newspaper, is an integral part. The description of the desert as the natural locus of the colonial experience and its major role in the articles written for the *Corriere* are then both the consequence of the fact that North Africa, in its natural conformation, was ideal to stimulate Buzzati's reflection on concepts such as mystery and eternity, but also that the commonly accepted image of those territories was that of a new frontier to be explored and conquered by the empire.

Buzzati's viewpoint was that of a journalist who deliberately decided to mix factuality and fictional devices, but came from a precise idea of history: in *Le mots et les choses* Foucault explains how «it is on the basis of [a] perceived order [...] that general theories as to the ordering of things [...] will be constructed» (Foucault 1970: 12) and that it is «on the basis of [a] historical a priori [that] ideas could appear» (*ibid.*: 15). This “historical a priori” is of fundamental relevance to understand the ideas behind Buzzati's modes of representation. Again in Foucault's words, Buzzati acts as a poet «who constantly [...] rediscovers the buried kinship between things [...]. Beneath the established signs [...] he hears another, deeper, discourse [...]» (*ibid.*: 63).

The new “deeper discourse” Buzzati “hears” buried under the metaphor of the desert is the possibility of redemption: the chance, somehow, of starting again, out of the horror of the present time. It is not a religious redemption but an ethical one. Buzzati's aim is to see history not in political or ideological terms, but in ethical terms: with its large unspoilt areas, the desert becomes a metaphor for a new beginning. The desert, away from areas colonized by the empire, is neither war nor retaliation, neither infrastructure nor modernity: it is the opportunity, at least in appearance, of imagining a new harmonious reality. From within the historical mechanism of which Buzzati himself is a part, the desert allows us metaphorically to go outside the mechanism and capture the timelessness of a new history yet to be written. It is therefore something more intangible than real.

However, the colonial world as narrated by Buzzati required a return to the reality of the Fascist enterprise in North Africa, necessary in order to justify his presence as a correspondent. Hence Buzzati, between the uncritical exaltation of the colonial endeavor and the refusal of participating in it, chose the lesser of two evils: to give the role of protagonists of his pieces of reportage to anti-heroes. That of the hero is one of the most recurrent figures both in Buzzati's narrative and in Fascist propaganda. The ambivalent space of North Africa offered the journalist the chance to portray soldiers and patriots who were fighting to bring civilization to the colonized people. However, the relationship between Buzzati and militarism was not that simple. As stated by Caspar, «esaltare sistematicamente gli "eroi" passati o presenti e il governo stesso non era certo l'ambizione e lo scopo principali di Buzzati [...]. [Buzzati] dedica pochi articoli a personaggi ufficiali del Regime. Quando lo fa [...] è perché si tratta di circostanze eccezionali» (in Buzzati 1997: 46)²⁵. If Fascist heroes find space within Buzzati's reportage only when he cannot avoid it, then the people who crowd *L'Africa di Buzzati* are anti-heroes. When Buzzati had to deal with official representatives of the government in Africa, he chose to give priority to those who showed more interest in ordinary people, as in the case of the reportage on the visits of the minister Teruzzi and the Duke of Aosta. A preference for the more accommodating Duke, to whom Buzzati dedicated five articles (two of which were censored), is evident, especially for the attention given to the 'residenti' and the 'ascari'²⁶. Teruzzi, on the other hand, was interested only in visiting the most important cities and the most spectacular aspects of the colonization (See Buzzati 1997: 46, 47).

²⁵ Tr: The systematical celebration of past or present "heroes" and of the government itself was not almost certainly Buzzati's main ambition and purpose. [Buzzati] dedicates only a few articles to official members of the Regime. When he does it, it is because the circumstance is exceptional.

²⁶ The 'ascari' were the indigenous troops which served under the Italian Army during the colonial period.

The anti-hero that dominates Buzzati's articles is not an indestructible character who fights against evil. He is a man with doubts and fears who is able to accept his own destiny and to face it with dignity. Ethics becomes the yardstick according to which Buzzati approaches history and its representation: only those who are able to face their destinies and to acknowledge their responsibilities deserve to be remembered. Buzzati's aim to portray examples of courage and ethical conduct among those who were experiencing the life in the colonies reaches moments of almost religious involvement. Buzzati's anti-heroes who face their responsibilities have no fear of death and live in a harmonious relationship with nature and they are both Italian and natives: a good example are the 'ascari' of "A cavalo' Savoia' le le cuscumbuia'!" called 'hawk feathers' that Buzzati defines as one of the bravest troops of the empire (Buzzati 1997: 95). The workmen on the Dancalia road are seen in such a heroic way that Buzzati perceives them as enviably different, a perhaps natural reaction to the presence of a hero (*ibid.*: 126)²⁷. In "Notte dancala con ingegnere e gattopardo", the engineer Raffa deals with a leopard with extreme calm, while continuing to do his job of directing the construction. The possible examples are numerous: from Guaschino, Locker and Bonardi, protagonists of "Lavoro di Pionieri", who reinvented themselves in Ethiopia as brick makers (Buzzati 1997: 182-185), to the men from Puglia who founded the 'Bari d'Etioopia' (*ibid.*: 187).

Nevertheless, this constant ethical drive which guides Buzzati's representation of both the space and the protagonists of the colonial endeavor hides more complex reasons, once again inscribed within the epistemological context of which Buzzati himself was part. Not only the representation of the desert, but also that of Buzzati's anti-heroes is dependent on «an intellectual framework that was dominated [...] by the notion of an established order rapidly coming to an end so as to give way to a radically new mode of being in the world» (Burdett 2010:

²⁷ Interestingly enough the censor deleted the word 'invidiosamente', probably because of the racist idea that Italian could have never felt jealous of a native.

9). The preference for those who were literally building the colonial empire is not only an individual choice of the author; it inserts his journalistic correspondence into a specific frame of references imposed by Fascism. This framework clearly asked for «the representation of the indigenous community's lived experience of time as passive, undifferentiated and static» and «the indigenous culture of those parts of northern and eastern Africa [...] served as the visible antithesis of the new world that Fascist Italy claimed that it was in the process of creating» (Burdett 2010: 13). Hence, in Africa, Buzzati's aesthetic and philosophical choices are constantly influenced and complicated by his contemporary ideological framework.

Racism and "Orientalism"

The encounter in the colonies with the natives addresses directly the problem of race and its traces within the reality described in *L'Africa di Buzzati*. The problem of racism in Italian Fascist colonies is a complex one, featuring internal contradictions between the ideology of the regime and how its ideas were actually carried out. As explained by Fabrizio De Donno, before the decision was made to invade African soil, «the idea of Mediterranean unity created a rhetoric of inclusion between Italians and the African peoples [...]», and this idea «continued to flourish during the first fascist period up to 1936, in support of anti-British, anti-German [...], as well as anti-racist policies [...]» (De Donno 2006: 401). However, when Buzzati left for the colonies in 1939, the situation had radically changed: «with the invasion and the proclamation of the fascist empire [...], fascist Italy began a new "racist" phase» and «[...] by 1937 a regime of "apartheid" was in force in Italian East Africa» (De Donno 2006: 405)²⁸. However, the practical application

²⁸ See also what Alberto Sbacchi states: «la politica coloniale degli italiani, una volta stanziatisi nelle zone principali e assicuratisi il controllo dei centri urbani, cominciò a rivelarsi crudele, razzista e contraddittoria» (Sbacchi 1991: 470). Tr: Italian colonial politics, once it was settled in the main areas

of this racism was not always possible: it had to face the fact that Italian colonists from the peninsula worked and often lived side by side with the natives²⁹. The contradictions and differences between the premises and the applications of Fascist racism in Ethiopia are mirrored by Buzzati's attitude towards the natives.

Buzzati never approached the natives with fanaticism: his encounter with African people is generally marked by a positive attitude, and this is particularly evident in the articles in which he mentions his attendant, the 'ascari' Ghilò. In the article "L'ascari Ghilò leone", for example, Buzzati describes the ambush by Ethiopian rebels in which Ghilò died, and he has words of sincere affection and respect for his attendant, while his loyalty and courage are strongly emphasized (Buz-

and took over the control of the urban centers, started to reveal itself as cruel, racist and contradictory.

²⁹ «[...] la legislazione razziale non fu applicata ovunque e con la stessa forza. Sebbene essa sostenesse la separazione delle due razze, ciò non si dimostrò attuabile in città come Addis Abeba a causa della carenza di abitazioni, per cui gli italiani furono comunque obbligati a vivere a stretto contatto con gli etiopici» (Sbacchi 1991: 485; Tr: The racial legislation was not applied anywhere and with the same strength. Although it supported the separation between the two races, this could not be applied in cities such as Addis Abeba, because of the lack of houses, hence Italians were forced to live side by side with the Ethiopians); «[...] il tentativo di Mussolini di fare degli italiani una razza padrona fallì perché l'italiano medio era incurante della separazione razziale e poco attento alla legislazione razzista. Gli italiani [...] non applicarono le leggi razziali con il fanatismo tedesco» (*ibid.*: 486 Tr: Mussolini's attempt to make a race of masters out of Italians failed because the average Italian did not care about racial separation and did not pay attention to racist legislation. Italian people did not apply the racial laws with German fanaticism (*ibid.*: 486). See also Barrera 2005; the chapter "Razzismo di stile italiano" in Sbacchi 1980: 217-241; the chapter "La questione della razza" in Del Boca 1996: 218-276.

zati 1997: 102-107)³⁰. Interestingly, this article is not only one of the restricted number of five pieces dedicated to episodes of warfare, but, as underlined by Caspar, is characterized by an atmosphere that resembles that of *Il deserto dei Tartari* (in Buzzati 1997: 102). Not by chance, Buzzati presents himself in the article not by name, but as lieutenant Drogo, the name of the novel's protagonist. The narrative framework is similar to that of a fantastic story: while the company is moving towards remote mountains and is attacked by a group of rebels, Ghilò's concerns are about Buzzati/Drogo (Buzzati 1997: 104). The battle is presented as the climax of a long period of waiting, and the atmosphere is rarefied, as in a world between reality and fantasy. After having been informed of the death of his attendant, Buzzati interrupts the narrative of the battle and dedicates to Ghilò the rest of the article, which becomes a piece of fiction: Buzzati imagines that Ghilò's soul is «uscita dall'involucro nero e sta navigando lassù [...] diretta [...] al cielo degli spiriti semplici e buoni» (*ibid.*: 105)³¹. The story is set in a sort of dream at the threshold of the afterworld: Ghilò finds himself facing a tall and beautiful official, covered in silver. The official tells off the attendant for having abandoned Buzzati, but when he finds out that Ghilò died in order to protect the journalist, he calls him "lion" and sends him to a «very long leave» (*ibid.*: 106).

However, a certain sense of irony towards peoples who were generally considered socially, culturally and politically inferior emerges from Buzzati's reportage. A first example may be found in this very same article: every time an 'ascari' speaks in Italian he uses only the infinitive tense. If this is read as being plausible, then the choice acquires the form of mockery when the fantastic figure of the official says to Ghilò: «Tu avere lasciato signor tenente, questo non stare buono. Tu adesso non poter più tornare, tu perduto anche moschetto, tu perduto

³⁰As reminded by Caspar, the loyalty of the 'ascari' is not one of Buzzati's inventions. Their loyalty towards their superiors had been a reality since the creation of these special troops in 1885 (in Buzzati 1997: 98).

³¹ Tr: It has come out of the black wrap and is floating up there, towards the sky of simple and good spirits.

cavallo» (*ibid.*: 106)³². Elsewhere, the references to the racial differences between colonizers and colonized are even more subtle: «I bianchi, per evidenti ragioni, si limitavano a compiti di caposquadra» (*ibid.*: 164)³³. But there are passages in which generalizations and stereotypes are evident³⁴. Besides, Buzzati defines the remains of the society of the Ethiopian Negus as primitive (*ibid.*: 148), while the city of Asmara «trasportata di peso [...] in un civilissimo paese europeo, farebbe la sua bellissima figura» (*ibid.*: 157)³⁵. Traces of a supposed superiority of the Italian race over the colonized characterize Buzzati's descriptions of Ethiopian habits, as in the censored article "Festa di nozze" (Buzzati 1997: 248-253). In others judgments of local customs, especially in the case of religious rituals, are almost offensive: «Di solito, bisogna dire la verità, le cerimonie copte appaiono piuttosto squallide se non addirittura straccione» (*ibid.*: 163)³⁶.

Buzzati's descriptions, even when they are merged with literary fiction, develop from the viewpoint of a Western man who cannot ad-

³² On the Italian spoke by the natives see also the article "Quando i negri credono di parlare italiano. Incroci e bizzarrie in uso in Etiopia" (Buzzati 1997: 273-276): Buzzati's ironic tone is evident from the title.

³³ Tr: Whites, for evident reasons, were assigned only to the role of group leaders

³⁴ «Il sudanese saluta tutti quelli che passano, lo iemenita se ne infischia. Lo iemenita al lavoro continua a cantare [...]. Il sudanese invece non canta. Ma tutti e due in fatto di abitazione si arrangiano facilmente. Prendono sei sette bidoni, ci stendono sopra una stuoia e la casa è bell'e fatta» (Buzzati 1997: 135). Tr: The Sudanese greets all the people passing by, the Yemeni could not care less. The Yemeni sings while working. The Sudanese, on the contrary, does not sing. But both of them gets by easily when it comes to houses. They take six or seven cans, they stretch a mat above them and the house is done.

³⁵ Tr: If forcibly moved to a very civilized European country, it would make a very good impression.

³⁶ Tr: To be honest, Coptic ceremonies usually appear rather squalid, when they are not even miserable.

dress North African peoples without bias: the bourgeois cultural and social environment in which he grew up and worked constituted a background which inevitably made him write about the colonized from a patronizing point of view. In order to understand this process it is necessary to read Buzzati's articles with reference to Edward Said's concept of "orientalism": «[...] what gave the Oriental's world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West» (Said 1978: 40). Said explains how the representations of the East available to the Western public are always written by European scholars, and how they create a pattern of metaphors and representations used to describe the Orient which not only form a proper literary tradition but also influence the way the Orient is perceived and judged. Buzzati's journalism could not help but be influenced by the consequences of the process that Said describes as «ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them")» (Said 1978: 43).

By building on Said, but integrating his study with the theories of the sociologist Peter Berger, Charles Burdett argues that the entire corpus of the literary production of the correspondents from the Italian colonies «serves [...] as a means of examining how the cultural geography of the regime was defined and elaborated upon [...]; it can be used as a means of considering the continuation, over time, of certain modes of perception [...]» (Burdett 2011: 331). Burdett's work is important in that it does not commit the mistake of «exaggerating the degree to which the impressions [of one individual or another and hence of Buzzati as well] were formulated independently when [...] the views they were keen to express often repeated [...] officially sanctified opinions» (*ibid.*: 331-332). Buzzati's writings from the colonies are then inevitably «to some degree, indicative of collectively organized interpretations of the human world» (*ibid.*: 332). However, according to Burdett, it is not enough to rely only on Said and other post-colonial thinkers when analyzing the work of journalists in North Africa, and this is the reason why he builds his argument on Berger's studies «on the social con-

struction of reality» (*ibid.*: 332). Burdett argues that «the subject rather than passively internalizing the structures and concepts of the social world, actively appropriates these through an ongoing dialectic with the society» (*ibid.*: 333). In other words, Buzzati «is [...] a co-producer of the social world» (*ibid.*: 334) he is representing and uses it as an instrument for ordering his own experience. For these reasons, Buzzati's concentration on the building of the cities and various kinds of infrastructures can only partially be interpreted as a personal choice, be it aesthetical or ethical: it is rather the result of «a violent and dramatic process of world creation» which Fascism imposed in Italian colonies and which had in the «organization of its perception» one of its most important characteristics (*ibid.*: 335). In particular, the representation of the so-called 'major public works' was intended as a «proof of the exportation and implementation of the material structures of the metropolis» in the conquered territories (*ibid.*: 335). The space in which Buzzati is able to express himself by being neither entirely free from nor entirely constrained by Fascism impositions, resembles the concept of 'agency'. This is consonant with Judith Butler's concept of agency when she explains that «the speaking subject makes his or her decision only in the context of an already circumscribed field of linguistic possibilities. One decides on the condition of an already decided field of language» (Butler 1997: 129). *L'Africa di Buzzati* is rich in «all the figures of speech associated with the Orient [that] are all decorative and self-evident [...]» (Said 1978: 72), because the representation of Ethiopia offered by the author is «embedded [...] in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer» (Said 1978: 272-273). In Buzzati's narrative, and in line with Said's "orientalism", North Africa is described as a mysterious, exotic land. If the West is rational and civilized, then Ethiopia is strange and irrational. The entire collection is rich in examples such as the description of Dancalia as boundless and wild (Buzzati 1997: 135), and the characterization of Africa as classic and ancient, apparently "untouched" since the beginning of times (*ibid.*: 153). As Burdett claims while analyzing Ciro Poggiali's diaries, also in the case of Buzzati's correspondences their significance «is ultimately not what they reveal about the complexities of the psychology

of the author, but rather what they reveal about the web of attitudes and perceptions concerning Italy's role in Africa in which his thought processes were inextricably enmeshed» (Burdett 2011: 341). The relationship between Buzzati's fiction and non-fiction work and his vision of Africa and Fascism's representation of the colonial empire address the question of censorship if one thinks about it as a framework of constraints which influenced the writer also in an indirect way. In Butler's words «censorship appears to be the restriction of speech» (Butler 1997: 127), which can be intended as «implicit», «if we do not remain restricted to its legal definition» (*ibid.*: 128).

The evidence collected from the close reading of the texts of *L'Africa di Buzzati* shows that, while in Libya and Ethiopia, Buzzati tried to concentrate his aesthetic experience on the contrast between fantasy and fiction by building a bridge between news and the fictional baggage of fantastic metaphors and themes he was already using in his fiction. However, the aim of finding a space within his journalistic representation in which freedom of imagination and nature could have a role is limited by the cultural and ideological framework in which he had to work. Hence, it is not always clear if we should read the presence of fantasy as incidental or as a conscious form of 'resistance' to Fascist censorship. The encounter with what was the "otherness" of the colonized communities was a stimulating point of departure and the desert represented the possibility of a "new beginning" for the anti-hero protagonists of the building of the Italian "fourth shore". Yet, in those years Buzzati, as a correspondent of the *Corriere della Sera*, represented, together with other commentators and journalists, the face of the invader, and his work of reportage is today the complex record of how the coerciveness of the "new world" imposed by Fascism on African populations was experienced by his sensibility.

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I have studied at the University of Padua where I earned my *Laurea Triennale* (B.A.) in Literature and my *Laurea Specialistica* (M.A.) in Medieval and Modern Literature and Philology. I have been awarded a PhD in Italian studies at the Royal Holloway University of London under the supervision of Dr. Fabrizio De Donno. My thesis was focused on the investigation of the characteristics of the merging of fantasy and journalism within Dino Buzzati's non-fictional production and in particular on the cultural role of Buzzati's journalistic work between the 1940s and the 1970s.

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The paper

Date sent: 15/01/2015

Date accepted: 01/04/2015

Data published: 15/05/2015

How to quote this paper

Schiavon, Francesco, "Fantasy and Censorship: Dino Buzzati's correspondence from Italian colonies", *Censura e auto-censura*, Eds. A. Bibbò, S. Ercolino, M. Lino, *Between*, V.9 (2011), <http://www.betweenjournal.it/>